

The Editorial Notebook

Behind the Lithuania Crisis

Why does a competent leader start doing things that are palpably ineffective and even self-defeating? Usually because the pressures on that leader are far greater than generally perceived, and maybe more specific and ominous.

Take the case of Mikhail Gorbachev and Lithuania. He has Soviet armed forces flapping their wings and grinding tank gears all around that self-declared independent country. But he and his aides still say they will not use force to keep Lithuania within the union. So, the military demonstrations serve only to inflame Lithuanian nationalism and raise worried eyebrows in the West.

Two days ago President Gorbachev banned the sale of firearms in Lithuania and decreed that all such arms now in private hands be turned in to the authorities for temporary safekeeping. He surely knows that the citizens there aren't likely to be lining up for their pawn tickets.

On one level, the reason for these strange acts is obvious. Mr. Gorbachev sees himself as a Soviet Abraham Lincoln — bound by law, history and practical imperatives to preserve the Soviet Union. If Lithuania can face down and keep its independence from mighty Moscow, other Soviet constituent republics soon would follow that same path.

But the interesting question is not so much the force of this argument, but who besides the usually careful Mr.

Military and K.G.B. Make Gorbachev Err

Gorbachev is making it. There's increasing information from visitors to Moscow and from Western intelligence to suggest that those pressing this case are the leaders of the military and the K.G.B., the Soviet secret police.

Along with the intelligentsia, the military and the K.G.B. have been the main props for Mr. Gorbachev's revolution. They understood far better than most of their countrymen just how far behind the West the Soviet Union had fallen and how fast the gap was widening. And they saw Mr. Gorbachev's reforms as the only way to restore their country to great-power status. But they see little sense in waiting for these reforms to turn the Soviet Union around if whole chunks of the nation secede in the meantime.

Mikhail Gorbachev simply cannot afford to lose military and K.G.B. support, especially with the recent successes of the more radical and independent reformers in recent Soviet elections. Perhaps more pointedly and immediately than with any other crisis he has faced, Mr. Gorbachev's power base is at stake. Thus he has to take steps against Lithuania that make little sense to prove his toughness to his prime constituents. As a result, he might well end up taking great risks with destructive consequences for Russians, Lithuanians and the West — unless Moscow and Vilnius quickly find a compromise formula for talks.

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